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Mindsaga #1

# **Mindflight**

**Stephen Goldin**

**Parsina**  
**PRESS**  


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Dedicated to the Trimbles

John & Bjo

Katwen & Lora

for being originals in a world of imitations



**PART I:**

**EARTH**



## **Chapter 1**

Alain Cheney sat quietly in the spaceliner's passenger lounge, face buried in his hands. He caressed his forehead delicately with his fingers, as though by massaging the skin outside his skull he could ease the pulsing pain growing within it. His eyes were closed against the bright light of the room, and he had intentionally slowed his breathing down to a steady, rhythmic pattern to help him cope with the pain.

There was a presence approaching him. With a minimum of mental exertion, Alain could read that it was a ship's steward who had noticed this one passenger left sitting in the lounge. As the man came nearer, a picture of conflicting emotions grew sharper in Alain's mind. The steward was concerned because the passenger was not looking well; he was also annoyed because he'd hoped to leave the ship



early, and this complication could conceivably delay his departure.

As he came within what he considered acceptable limits, the steward spoke aloud. "Are you all right, sir?"

Alain lifted his head and opened his eyes. He looked straight into the man's face and tried to project both confidence and normality. "Yes, fine, thank you."

"Almost everyone else has disembarked, sir." Assured now that the passenger was not ill, the steward's mood shifted subtly over to impatience. As an afterthought he added, "Were you needing any further services?"

"No, I... I just wanted a few last moments here in the lounge before leaving. It was such a nice trip I wanted to store up my memories of it by sitting here a while longer. I hope I'm not inconveniencing you."

"Oh no, sir, not at all," the steward said, while all his thoughts contradicted his words. This was an inconvenience, and the sooner the passenger left, the better the steward would like it.

"I was just about finished anyway," Alain said, standing up. The calm of the room had been shattered for him; the steward would now be hovering over him constantly with subtle hints he should be on his way. The mental oppressiveness would only make his condition worse. He might as well leave and face the inevitable crush outside.

Alain took one last look around the lounge. He'd spent a great deal of time here on the journey from Leone to Earth. Even though the ship had carried nearly a hundred people, comparatively few of them

were ever in the lounge at any given moment, which meant the number of minds pressing onto his own would be minimal. He'd spent most of the voyage staring into the infinite blackness of space, letting all sensations go numb and reveling in the oblivion the enormous viewscreens provided.

Now those same viewscreens merely exhibited the hell waiting for him outside the ship's hull: Vandenberg Spaceport, Earth—a seething mass of humanity in perpetual Brownian movement down the scrubbed tile corridors. It was hard for him to think of Earth as “home” any more—he'd spent so little of his adult life here that he felt almost a stranger to its ways.

The steward's relief was almost tangible as Alain left the lounge and began walking down the halls to the main hatch. There would normally have been a smartly dressed attendant standing at the doorway to wish him goodbye, but the ship had been aground so long that the attendant had left the post; maintenance crews were now swarming over the ship, checking out its condition after its trip through interstellar space, and preparing it for its next voyage in a couple of days. The mechanics paid scant attention as Alain walked out the hatchway and started down the ramp toward the customs building.

Leaving the ship was like a physical blow; every step down the ramp was a hammer pounding at his skull. Ahead of him and through those ominous double doors were people—hundreds, if not thousands, of them—each thinking individual thoughts and broadcasting them randomly into the air. To Alain Cheney, a trained telepath, it was a raucous shout-

ing that could not be stopped by simply plugging his ears.

Most telepaths used drugs to dull their powers and drown out background “noises.” Knowing that he was landing on Earth, an overcrowded world, Alain had downed two extra trimethaline capsules earlier that morning, but his precautions seemed inadequate now. Even trimethaline did not help much these days.

By the time he reached the foot of the ramp, the telepathic din was a surf pounding at his skull. He paused, bracing himself for the ordeal to follow, then pushed open the doors and entered. The audible clamor only added to the psychic Babel beating on his brain. Mobs of people pushed through the large open chamber before him, shoving and shouting in impersonal confusion. Loudspeakers blared incoherently from the low ceiling, and no one paid them the slightest attention. Vidicams in the upper corners scanned the scene coldly, noting any and all possible transgressions. Guards armed with variable-speed Horgan z-beam repeaters were stationed every few meters throughout the throng to correct any situations the vidicams spotted.

There were more vidicams and guards than he'd ever seen here before, he noted as he pushed his way through the riots of colors and the stench of all the mingled bodies. Nearly twice as many. *Things must be tight*, he thought. *Maybe I should be glad I don't live here.*

His luggage had already been offloaded, and was sitting on a counter. Alain waited in line, suffering through the tensions of the people around him until

his turn came. He gave the customs officer his claim check number and his suitcase was pulled from the rack and placed on the inspection table.

“Travel card,” the officer said routinely. Her thoughts revealed her as a woman bored with her job. It was near the end of her shift and she was anxious to get home.

She inserted the card in the comp slot and looked to her screen for a readout. Her eyebrows arched slightly as she scanned the information; but though her face didn't register much emotion, her thoughts were abundantly clear to the telepath. She looked at the special orders and checked Alain's appearance extra carefully with the photo on the readout. She stared back at Alain, and one hand reached surreptitiously under the table to press the special “attention” button. “Your papers seem to be in order, sir,” she said evenly, “but there is a question about the baggage. You'll have to speak to my supervisor. Come this way.” And she opened the gate to let Alain through.

“If you insist.” Alain was trying desperately to keep his face free of the pain he felt at the overflow of thoughts and emotions bombarding his mind. He'd never suffered from ocholophobia this severely before, but he braced himself against it and followed the officer into a small, brightly painted office where a man was waiting for him.

This dark-haired man was thin and weaselly, and looked much too young to be in this line of work. He was wearing civilian clothes: a silk pullover shirt with wide blue and red diagonal stripes, dark blue trousers that were tightly fitted at the thighs and

then bagged ridiculously the rest of the way. The pants legs were tucked into blue suede boots that reached to mid-calf. The young man's eyes were steadfastly serious.

The man stood up as Alain entered. Dismissing the customs officer with a curt wave of his hand, he faced Alain and said, "These interstellar voyages are quite wearing, aren't they?"

Alain had been expecting his contact to be somewhat older and dressed with considerably more conservatism. But there could be no mistake; this somber young man had delivered the proper recognition signal. "I've made the run often enough before," Alain said, giving the appropriate countersign.

He could tell from the other's mind that the preconditions of the rendezvous had been completed, but the contact was still showing signs of irritation. "Where have you been? Your ship docked two hours ago."

"I had personal duties to attend to."

"I've got more important things to do than sit around here all day waiting for you." Visions came to Alain of a busy office, piles of correspondence, hectic routine. They vanished quickly, though; this young man knew how to keep his mind in order when dealing with a telepath, and very few extraneous details escaped to the surface.

The contact walked over and belatedly offered his hand. "I'm Morgan Dekker. I've been instructed to see that you're well settled in while you're here." His handshake was firm, his tone cool and efficient. "Your bag is already on its way to the hotel room we've arranged. Come with me."

The two men left by a back entrance and began walking down a long, dim corridor. "I must commend old Tölling on his efficiency," Alain said as they walked. "This is the best handled arrangement I've been through yet."

Dekker stiffened. A blur of conflicting images raced through his mind before he brutally closed the door on them again. "Gunnar Tölling was terminated seven months ago," he said brusquely.

The other man's tone sent a chill down Alain's spine. Gunnar Tölling had been in charge of Operations ever since Alain had joined the Agency. That he could be "terminated" so abruptly spoke volumes about what was happening here on Earth these days. Alain wondered whether "terminated" meant what he thought it did.

Dekker's manner indicated that questions would not be welcomed, but Alain could not let the subject drop with so ungraceful a thud. "Who's in charge of Ops, then?" He tried to make the question sound nonchalant.

This time Dekker's voice was a little warmer. "Joby Karns."

That news was both surprising and welcome. Alain had gone through the Academy with Joby Karns; she was a very beautiful and resourceful woman. The two of them had even been lovers for a brief—very brief!—period; it hadn't worked out, but he'd always had warm feelings for her since then. He hadn't heard anything about her for the last ten years—and now here she was, suddenly, his boss.

"That's very good news," he said aloud. "She and I go back a long way together. I hope I'll have a chance

to see her while I'm here."

"I doubt it. She's at Headquarters in New York, and very busy."

They reached the end of the corridor and stepped out onto a pirt platform. Dekker stepped up to the signal box and rapidly punched out a series of numbers, then inserted his plastic ID card into the slot. Within minutes, one of the personal, independent rapid transit cars glided quietly up to them and stopped.

The pirt car was little more than a large box on wheels, with seats inside for as many as four passengers and small windows for viewing the passing scenery. There were no guidance controls, merely a control panel into which the destination's coordinates could be entered. The machine drew its power and instructions from the computer lines buried beneath the streets.

This particular car was painted red and white on the outside, with a neutral gray interior. The inside walls had been painted and scratched with standard graffiti comments. The two men got in and Dekker punched their destination into the car's circuits. The doors clicked shut and the vehicle rolled off along the street.

Neither man spoke during the journey. Dekker was busy keeping up his mental shields; he obviously had been informed that Alain was a telepath and was determined not to allow very much of himself or his thoughts to slip out. Alain, while curious about this strange young man, was too busy fighting off the throbbing pain in his mind to bother with more than a superficial glance into the other's thoughts. In-

stead, Alain leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes, trying as best he could to let tranquility wash over him. It wasn't easy.

Occasionally Alain would glance out the window as the pirt car made its way to his hotel. He was vaguely disturbed by what he saw. Was it only his imagination, or were things looking dirtier, less cared for than during his last visit here? The people who clogged the streets were all dressed in brightly colored clothing, but the mood was anything but cheerful. Pedestrians stared fixedly ahead, scarcely bothering to look at the world on either side of them. There were neither smiles nor frowns in evidence, and the overwhelming feeling that bombarded his mind was apathy. People just did not care.

*There's always been a listless portion of the population in any human society, Alain rationalized. It's probably just the route Dekker programmed that's taking us through a less affluent neighborhood, that's all.*

But the depression that began on the trip from Leone to Earth remained with him even after Dekker dropped Alain off at the hotel where his reservations had been made. The telepath flopped down wearily on the bed and tried in vain to blot from his mind the impressions that were impinging from people in adjoining rooms.

*I'm glad I'll be seeing the doctor tomorrow, he thought. Maybe he can suggest something for this condition.*

Dr. Javier daPaz looked suspiciously at the file projection on his computer screen. It was a profile of



the telepath he was scheduled to examine tomorrow, Alain Cheney. He'd seen the man on three previous occasions, once every two years when he was called in from the field for the required mental and physical tests.

There were two lines scrawled at the bottom of the notes on the last examination. Translated from daPaz's personal shorthand, they read, "Signs of incipient psi instability noted. Telepause likely within two to three years."

*Not much to hang a death sentence on, is it?* he thought bitterly. He dreaded the examination tomorrow and what he feared he'd find in Cheney's mind. He dreaded even worse the consequences of his findings, for there would be no way to hide them; the Agency would be monitoring all his instruments, and would know the results as soon as he himself did.

He'd joined the Agency many years ago as a dedicated young doctor, full of zeal at the thought of doing his own small part to help Earth's defense against the outsiders.

But as the years wore on, the sheen of his enthusiasm was eroded by the rust of cynicism. He began noting the recurrence of certain patterns—the most disturbing of which was the one that occurred in the strongest, ablest telepaths once they reached the stage of development labeled "telepause." Once that was diagnosed, they never returned for subsequent examinations.

He was not sure when he realized the telepaths were being deliberately eliminated by their own side. At first, his assumption was that they were simply being reassigned to less strenuous duties in view of

their delicate condition—but gradually that opinion was turned around. There was no single cause; merely a word here, a significant glance there from the Operations people—little clues that weighed on his mind and made him uneasy with his task.

Then, just after the last case he'd diagnosed, he happened to spot a small item in the evening news-fax about an unidentified body being washed up on the beach near San Luis Obispo. The woman had had red hair and only four fingers on her right hand...which sounded suspiciously like the woman he'd recently diagnosed as telepausal. Try as he would, he could find no other information on the dead woman—and a call to the coroner in the area brought him a sharp rebuke to mind his own business.

He'd taken a week's vacation time and gone on a binge of drinking and drugging to try to wipe the guilt out of his mind, but the death was not so easily assuaged. He thought then of leaving the Agency, trying to decide whether it would be an act of bravery or cowardice. He had reached no resolution and, from sheer force of habit, slipped right back into the Agency routine once his vacation was finished.

Now the problem was facing him again, in a way he could not avoid. Tomorrow, Alain Cheney would walk into this office with a probable case of telepause. And then—

DaPaz rose from his desk, went into the adjoining bathroom and looked at his prematurely lined face in the mirror. *And then what, Doctor?* he asked himself. *What will you do then?*

## **Chapter 2**

Despite being more than five minutes late for the briefing, Joby Karns entered the conference room the very embodiment of poise and elegance. Her lean, supple body was clad in a simple black and red dashiki. She didn't need to dress up to make herself beautiful; she knew her copper red hair and unlined face made her look a good ten years younger than she really was. Her beauty could only be enhanced by the power that accompanied her position. A thorough knowledge of her assets and her influence gave her all the confidence she needed.

Her blue eyes scanned the room, noting that everyone else was here: Marina Shekova of Budget; Ho Li Wan, "Public Relations" (in essence, propaganda); Colonel Adaman Haiphez, Military Liaison; Karl Junger of Counterintelligence; Cohila Buturu of Technical Services; James Tennon of Cryptography;

Romney Glazer of Internal Security; Phyllis Rokowsky, liaison to the Director; and, standing at the front of the room ready to conduct the meeting, Hakim Rajman, in charge of Assimilation and Correlation.

*A council of equals, Joby thought wryly. But some of us are more equal than others.*

She could tell they'd been waiting specifically for her to arrive before starting. She gave them a curt nod as she sat down.

"How good of you to come, Joby," Romney Glazer commented acidly, as only he could.

"It's nice to know I'm missed," she replied. She saw no need to apologize to them, or even to explain that she'd been waiting for the long-overdue call from Dekker about the arrival of Alain Cheney. It still hadn't come, and she was beginning to worry that something may have gone wrong. But she owed no explanations to anyone here—least of all to a putzer like Glazer.

"Joby already knows most of what we're going to discuss," Hakim Rajman said from the front of the room, cutting off the bitter exchange. "It was her agents who discovered the problem. Perhaps I should let her explain the initial stages."

All heads turned once again to her. Joby remained in her seat as she said, "Three days ago, the Leonean Defense Ministry staged a complete shutdown of all our operations there. I mean one hundred percent. All our sources either evaporated, closed their mouths or 'disappeared.' All our monitoring devices were either ferreted out and destroyed, or neutralized in some other way. The logi-

cal inference is that something is happening inside there, something so monumental that they're willing to tip their hand that they knew our sources, rather than let us get the faintest whiff of what it is."

"There are other reasons for housecleaning," Karl Junger said. "A change in administration sometimes wants to get off to a good start by making sure all the spies are out of its closets. Or some overeager junior assistant may want to please his boss—or he may be trying a power play to replace him by showing him up as inefficient."

"Or perhaps," Romney Glazer spoke up again, "perhaps Joby's people were so clumsy that they were finally an embarrassment to the Leonean government itself, so it put them out of their misery."

"A&C is aware of all those reasons and more," Rajman said with a sharp glance at Glazer. He did not like playing the role of peacemaker, but he knew he had to if this meeting were to be kept under control. "We feel that none of them apply in this particular instance. The hierarchy in the Leonean administration—particularly Defense—has been stable for months, so they have no need to show off. And if this were a feint—if they wanted us to think something was happening there so we'd concentrate all our resources on it and ignore something else—they almost undoubtedly would have left us some little hole to peek through, giving us tantalizing glimpses of their supposed secret. My staff and I are convinced that this crackdown represents a genuine effort to keep something from us, something happening at Defense."

Phyllis Rokowsky cleared her throat. She was a

small but stately looking woman, approaching her middle years with just a trace of gray in her elegantly coiffured black hair. "The question now," she said, "is what are they trying to keep from us, and why?" Though she spoke in gentle terms, everyone paid attention; Phyllis Rokowsky reported personally to the Director, who in turn reported to the Primus.

Rajman cleared his throat and shuffled some papers around in front of him. "Whatever it is, we can be reasonably certain it involves only Leone and none of its allies; all indications are that things are quiet along diplomatic channels. The immediate thought was that they've developed some startling new weapons system. While we can't rule that possibility out entirely, our breakdown analysis shows less than a five percent probability. We've kept a careful monitor on all their ongoing projects, and none of them are close enough to completion. Even if they were, none of the new systems is advanced enough to justify a complete intelligence blackout of the sort they're using."

Rokowsky nodded and turned to Glazer. "Romney, as our expert on Internal Security, how long could *we* maintain such a blackout if we had something desperately important to protect?"

"Not all that long." Glazer was all business now. "I'd say two months at the outside. Working under heavy secrecy like that puts a big psychological strain on everyone involved. Plus, there's the fact that the opposition will be working triply hard to crack the outer shell. Entropy inevitably guarantees that little chinks will begin forming almost as soon as their screen is in place."

“It will also be expensive,” added Marina Shekova, the Agency’s budget director. “The cost of their own internal security will have to rise two to four times to handle the increased workload.”

Rokowsky considered the input she was receiving from the department heads. “In other words,” she said slowly, “whatever they hope to gain by this tactic must be a short-range objective. They know they can’t keep us out forever. It would seem this is something that must be kept secret in the development stage if it’s going to exist at all; but once it’s set in motion it won’t matter whether we know or not. Is that a fair hypothesis?”

Rajman looked down at his notes, then back at Rokowsky. “A bit simplified, perhaps, but it coincides with my department’s diagnosis.”

“Good.” Rokowsky smiled. “Let me take my simplified theory a step further. What if they are planning a war, a surprise attack on us? That’s something they’d want to keep very secret right now, but it wouldn’t matter in two months because we’d know about it by then anyhow—the hard way.” She turned to the military liaison officer. “Comment, Colonel?”

Adaman Haiphez looked straight back at her. “From all the information available to me, Leone is not ready for a war.” He glanced over at Rajman and, getting a confirming nod, continued, “There are certain preparations that must be made if you’re planning a war. You have to make sure your troops are supplied—with arms, with fuel, with food, with clothing. You have to gear up domestic production so critical materials can be both manufactured and distributed. You have to redeploy manpower in key po-

sitions. There are a thousand small, telltale signs, none of which is apparent on Leone. Leone is not ready for a major war today, nor—in my opinion—could it gear up for one in a mere two months.”

Rokowsky nodded again. She was silent for a moment, then asked Haiphez, “What about us, colonel? Are *we* ready for a war?”

“We can easily defend ourselves against anything Leone can bring against us, now or in the foreseeable future.”

“That’s not what I asked,” Rokowsky said—so gently that it hardly sounded like a reprimand. “Visualize our alternatives, Colonel. The Leoneans have something so vital that they’re going to a lot of trouble to keep it from us. We, therefore, have to find out what it is. Suppose the Primus decides that this matter is so essential that all measures, including armed intervention, are justified. If we send a military expedition against Leone to crack their secrecy, all the independent planets will immediately resume hostilities against us. You know that as well as I do. My question, Colonel, is whether we are prepared to wage all-out war on so many fronts.”

Haiphez took a deep breath and looked away from her. “No, ma’am, we are not.”

Rokowsky smiled—a cold, triumphant expression. “Thank you, Colonel. That puts an upper limit on our possible response to this affair. Having thus eliminated the possibility of overt action, we are left with the covert methods. That is your responsibility, is it not, Ms. Karns?”

Joby looked the other woman squarely in the eye. She respected and admired Phyllis Rokowsky for the



smooth, effortless way she wielded her power—but Joby refused to be cowed by her. “You’re absolutely right. Since it was my department that first called everyone’s attention to the situation, we have also been studying it more closely than anyone else—with the exception, of course, of Hakim’s staff.”

There was a slight chuckle throughout the room. Hakim Rajman’s Assimilation and Correlation Department was by far the largest bureau within the Terran Intelligence Agency, with four times the manpower and six times the budget of any other single department. With data coming in continuously from sixty-three other inhabited worlds, there was an enormous need to sift it, evaluate it, and pass it on to those other sections of the government that needed to act on it. With so many people working inside, Rajman’s department was also the least well organized. The joke in the other departments was that A&C stood for “Anarchy and Confusion.”

Joby waited for the undercurrent of humor to subside before continuing. “Unfortunately, the timing of this whole situation could not have been worse as far as we’re concerned. Our chief-of-station on Leone is a telepath whom we suspect is on the verge of going telepausal. One week ago—just a few days before this entire matter blew up in our faces—he boarded a ship to come back here for his routine biannual checkup. If he’d waited a few days longer, I’m sure he would have been capable of penetrating the Leoneans’ best screens. But as it is...” She placed both her hands on top of the table. “If we find what we expect to find, I suppose we’ll have to replace him. And that, on top of this new development, puts

us at a great disadvantage.”

“Are you trying to build up a case for sympathy?” Glazer interrupted sharply.

Joby looked over at him. “What do you mean by that?”

Glazer gave one of his bitchy little smirks. While his eyes were fixed on Joby, his words were intended for the entire room. “I understand from your file that you attended the Academy with this agent and, in fact, had a very close relationship with him.”

*The bastard does his homework*, Joby thought in a cold fury. “Close or not,” she enunciated, “the rules governing telepausal agents are quite explicit and will be adhered to. One of my top assistants is handling the matter personally. I only express regret that a man of proven reputation—and I’m sure not even you could question Cheney’s service record—will not be available to us in solving this current and urgent problem.”

“I didn’t realize you would be so touchy,” Glazer said in mock apology. “If it would ease some of the burden from your mind, I could have some of my people take care of the Cheney problem for you.”

Joby bristled. “Operations has always taken care of its own lame horses, thank you. When we need help from the goon squad, we’ll ask for it.”

Phyllis Rokowsky had but to clear her throat again and all eyes went to her. “I think we have strayed from the primary subject under discussion,” she said in a soft voice. “Shall we return to the matter of Leone?”

Joby was furious at herself for letting Glazer ruffle her so badly—especially in front of Rokowsky.

She tried to put the matter out of her mind, but it kept insinuating itself into her behavior, disrupting her train of thought and causing her to falter slightly in the wrong places.

As best she could, she outlined to the assembled department heads her contingency plans for restructuring the Leonean organization in the event Cheney did need replacing. In addition, she promised to report within two days on a completely detailed strategy for piercing the Leoneans' shield of secrecy. Hakim Rajman pledged to have his staff work overtime to see if they could discover any clues about what might be happening there from previously known data.

The meeting dissolved as so many of them did, with no questions resolved, no actions decided. As Joby stood up to leave, Glazer tried to approach her. She brushed him off coldly with the excuse that she was expecting an important call and hurried back to her office.

"Has Morgan Dekker reported in yet?" she asked her secretary as she entered the spacious anteroom to her own suite of offices.

"No, ma'am."

*Damn, what's keeping him? He's more than two hours late!* "Well, buzz him through to me the instant he does, and keep the lines clear for him." She walked into her own office and closed the door against the world.

She tried to sit at her desk, but the combination of Glazer's heckling and Dekker's lateness made her too nervous. She lit up a drugrod, inhaling deep breaths and letting the effect flow into her. Within

minutes, she could feel the muscles at the back of her neck and shoulders starting to unknit themselves, could feel the easing warmth as the drug slowly worked its way into her brain, relieving some of the crushing burden she was carrying. On impulse, she stood up and walked to the wall control, dimming the room's lights to a minimum. With a twist of a second dial, she changed the scene on her office's north wall from the gentle desert landscape it normally showed to a holographic map of the as-yet explored section of the Galaxy.

Earth's solar system, naturally enough, was at the center of the map. Around it, forming an irregular globe, were the former colonies. And there, right up near the top of the map, was the small bit that was all men knew about the Dur-ill Empire.

"Empire." She was hardly aware she'd said the word aloud. Earth had had an empire too, more than a century and a half ago. The dominion of Terra had extended all around the mother planet in a sphere roughly thirty parsecs in diameter, including colonies on sixty-three inhabitable worlds. Nowhere had Man found any challenge to his supremacy; the Universe seemed his for the taking.

Then, within the space of a single decade, that dream of manifest destiny was shattered forever. Exploratory teams from the colony of Renna encountered the outer limits of the Dur-ill Empire. Scholars since that time had argued long and loud whether the ensuing war between widely disparate cultures had been inevitable. To Joby's mind, the argument was senseless; the war had happened, so of course it was inevitable.

Suddenly the dispersal of the human race throughout a vast volume of space became a liability rather than an asset. Earth's leaders found themselves tangled in an impossible logistical situation. They simply did not have the resources to defend and supply the colonies and, at the same time, carry on the war as it had to be conducted. A decision of priorities was made, and defense of the colonies was dropped in favor of devoting more resources to the development of technology and the growth of Earth's armed services.

The war raged on for eight years, and the government of Earth had to scrape the bottom of the barrel to keep itself going. With no intelligence about how the war was progressing for the Dur-ill, they were almost literally shooting in the dark at an enemy they hardly knew. Finally, when their resources were all but depleted, an armistice was reached whereby both humans and Dur-ill agreed never to violate the other's space again. Peace came once more.

Peace, that is, between humans and Dur-ill. Terra's former colonies were not overjoyed about the decision made eight years earlier to abandon them to their fate. In pure self-defense, they had formed an alliance of their own, and desperation had enabled them to battle the Dur-ill to a standstill. But with that war over, old relationships were dead. The human planets were not about to resume their former dependency on a world that had been all too eager to sacrifice them when the chips were down. Earth now found it had a handful of enemies to face instead of merely one.

Relations between Earth and the other hu-

man-occupied planets seesawed drastically over the hundred and fifty years since then. Fortunately, with the Dur-ill removed, the various colonies had little in common with one another except for their hatred of Earth; the defensive alliance they had formed during the war quickly evaporated, leaving a situation of many autonomous worlds in conflict and competition.

The Terran Intelligence Agency had been formed shortly after the end of the war. It was cobbled together from bits and pieces of the old colonial administration, with some shiny new departments added to fulfill more current needs. Its avowed purpose was several-fold: to promote the interests of Earth among the other planets; to keep Earth's government apprised of affairs on the former colonies; and, if not possible to make the other worlds friendly towards Earth, then at least to promote disunity among them so they could never band together to form an effective alliance against the mother planet.

The Operations Department had always been the elite outfit within the Agency, since its inception. Other departments had more manpower, more funding; Operations had more glamor. It was the philosophy of Operations personnel that all the other departments were nothing but glorified computer programmers; it was the agents in Ops who gathered the classified information and who engaged in the field work that made everything else the Agency did possible.

Joby Karns had worked long and hard to win her position as chief of Operations. There had been years of sacrifice, of long hours, of moving her way skillful-

ly across the chessboard of office politics, of guessing whom to favor and whom to dump, whom to sleep with and whom to scorn. The world of politics within the Agency was every bit as cutthroat as the world of espionage outside. One little slip, one small mistake could bring the entire structure tumbling down around her head.

She'd almost made such a slip this afternoon, when Glazer thought he'd spotted a trace of sentimentalism on her part for Alain Cheney. The mood of Earth's government these days was strictly utilitarian. It was sentimentalism that had caused the downfall of Joby's predecessor, Gunnar Tölling; Joby made a vow that the same fate would not befall her. She didn't think she still had any residual feelings for Alain—but even if she did, no one would ever see them. She would not give Glazer a clear shot at her back.

She didn't know how or why the fight had started, but Romney Glazer had hated her from the day she took over Ops. As head of Internal Security—in charge of making sure all regulations were obeyed and plugging any leaks within the Agency—he was a dangerous man to cross; his department was small, but it had authority disproportionately large for its size. She had tried being friendly, but Glazer had snubbed her—and, being gay, he was impervious to her physical charms. Joby had to treat him as a constant threat to her well-being—but at least he was a predictable one.

The intercom buzzed, startling Joby out of her reverie. "Morgan Dekker's call, ma'am," her secretary announced.

With a sigh of relief, Joby returned to her desk and punched the receiver button. "How did it go, Morgan?" she asked, hiding her anxiety behind a voice full of businesslike efficiency.

"Well enough. He was a few hours late getting off the ship, which is why I'm so late reporting. But once he showed up, things ran smoothly."

"Any traces of—" There was the barest of hesitations. "—of what we're looking for?"

"Hard to say. He seemed to be functioning well enough, but he was very quiet and reserved."

"Alain always was the introspective sort, always well in control of himself. That's why he's been such a good agent. We'll find out for sure tomorrow when he goes in for the examination. Do you think he suspected anything?"

On the screen before her, Dekker's face grimaced slightly. "Again, hard to say. He showed no signs, and I was careful to keep my thoughts under control—but it's always hard to know with a telepath. There was a mild flicker of something across his face when I told him you'd replaced Tölling. Would you know anything about that?"

Joby's political instincts sensed danger lurking in that innocent question. She knew Dekker harbored an infatuation for her, which could lead to feelings of jealousy if he felt she had any special interest in Alain. She was of two minds about his feelings for her. On the one hand, she had long ago made a personal rule never to sleep with anyone of lesser importance than herself, so she could not allow anything to come of her relationship with her aide; on the other hand, she did nothing to discourage him,



because his feelings for her would make him more loyal to her—and loyalty was a rare commodity in the Agency these days.

In an attempt to defuse his question, she shook her head. “No, not that I can think of. We did go through the Academy together; maybe he’s glad an old classmate has risen so high. Has he been installed properly?”

“When I got him to the hotel he went directly to his room, lay down on the bed and closed his eyes. He’s either asleep or meditating. In any event, the room’s monitored, so we’ll know if he attempts anything unusual and he’ll be followed if he leaves. But frankly, I don’t think he’ll give us any trouble.”

*That could almost be the story of Alain’s career,* Joby reflected. In fourteen years with the Terran Intelligence Agency, Alain Cheney had been an exemplary agent. He’d never disobeyed an order, never failed an assignment, never performed at anything less than a level of supreme competence. He was a constant factor in life, an eternal verity. And just because he was one of the top telepathic agents in her stable, she might have to kill him tomorrow.

*The Universe,* she decided, *can play very perverse tricks.*

“Good,” she said aloud. “I’ve got enough troubles without having to worry about him.”

“Since he was an old friend of yours,” Dekker said, a little too rapidly, “I was wondering whether you might, er, want to come out here for the decision tomorrow.”

“I said an old classmate, not an old friend,” Joby clarified carefully. “And I’m really too swamped with

work to make a trip all the way out there for something that trivial. I have confidence in you, Morgan; I'm sure you'll handle the details just fine." She gave him her Number Three smile: warm enough to make him feel a degree of solidarity with her, aloof enough not to make any rash promises. "Call me tomorrow when you learn the results of his tests." Without any formal sign-off, she terminated the connection.

What she'd told Dekker about too much work was quite true. This latest crisis would mean double or triple overtime for everyone on her staff having any connection to activities on Leone. She doubted she'd have a chance to leave her office until the reorganization and strike plans were all formalized and presented to the Agency Council.

Leaning back momentarily in her chair, she looked up at her stellar map once again. There, near the very top, was the pink dot that represented the Class K star Leone circled. Leone, being one of the systems nearest the Dur-ill Empire, had suffered some of the worst damage of the war—and consequently, the greatest hatred of Earth. Relations between the two worlds were tranquil at the moment, with a fair amount of trade and unrestricted travel between them. But Leone was a world that could flare up as a trouble spot at any moment, which was why the better agents were usually assigned there.

Now, apparently, it *had* flared up—and her best agent was well on his way toward elimination.

She wondered whether the tests two years ago might have been mistaken, and whether Alain might still be all right for a while. But she recognized that for the wishful thinking it was. The tests were virtu-

ally foolproof. Alain Cheney either was suffering from telepause now or would be in the very near future. Which meant he had to die.

*Damn!* With a frustrated shrug, Joby turned off the map and restored the lights in her office. She had plans to arrange and reports to write, and all her thoughts about the soon-to-be-late Alain Cheney would not alter that in the slightest.